Unnecessary oil disasters

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The BP oil disaster in the Gulf of Mexico 2010 could have been avoided if the experiences of earlier disasters had been put to use, researcher Charles Woolfson, Linköping university, claims. The United States government is now accusing BP of gross negligence and deliberate misconduct, and taking the company to court.

On April 20, 2010, the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded in the ocean south of the southern coast of the US. The explosion led to the deaths of eleven people and an unfathomable environmental catastrophe.

Charles Woolfson, former professor of Labour Sociology in Glasgow and currently professor of Labour Studies at REMESO, Linköping university, conducted a large study of the world's biggest oil disaster – the Piper Alpha – in the 1990s. 167 people lost their lives when this production platform sank into the North Sea in 1988.

In a new study, he now compares the two disasters and the (inadequate) culture of safety that caused them. He finds, he writes, several depressing similarities. If the right lessons had been learned from Piper Alpha, the accident at Deepwater Horizon would never have happened, he claims. The recommendation issued at that time should have become a turning point.

Woolfson points out a fundamental contradiction between safety and profitable production. In both disasters, there are examples of cost-cutting decisions that worsened safety. In the Deepwater Horizon case, a final independent test of the fateful cement seal was cancelled. The test

would have cost USD 128,000 (EUR 101,000).

Woolfson has received unexpected support – from the United States government, which recently submitted an application for a summons indictment through its Justice Department. The words and actions of the company concerning safety "should not be tolerated even in a medium-sized company producing goods for a shopping mall," according to the 39-page document.

Two other critical factors Woolfson emphasizes are what's known as "regulatory capture" and the fear-stricken, disunited employees.

Regulatory capture means that the independent agency inspecting an industry identifies itself more and more with the companies of that industry and their interests. This happened the Gulf of Mexico, where the number of exemptions from various environmental requirements increased from three in 1997 to 795 in 2000, all to avoid "cumbersome and unnecessary delays" in production. A program for tightened safety regulations dragged through endless consulting processes with the industry and ultimately never came to anything.

Cutbacks also affected the regulatory agency. The shrinking number of inspectors lacked sufficient training, and became more and more dependent on the expertise and information of the oil companies. This is according to the Obama-appointed independent National Commission's own 2011 report on Deepwater Horizon. The same weakness was pointed out after Piper Alpha. The industry's promises on self-regulation, voluntary enforcement and standards of conduct effectively torpedoed all demands for stricter supervision of safety arrangements.

The hesitation among the employees and the fear of making independent decisions also affected the catastrophic development of events in both cases, Woolfson states. On Deepwater Horizon, for example, the crew

dared not make a decision about activating an emergency system that could have constrained the disaster.

In total, BP has claims for damages against it totalling almost USD 70 billion (EUR 55.1 billion). The company denies all the accusations of negligence and misconduct.

"The fundamental questions we must ask are: What went wrong, who is responsible, and how can we prevent it from happening again?" Woolfson says.

"Industrial accidents don't just 'happen', they are often the result of a weak culture of safety and companies systematically failing to prioritize safety."

The study will be published in 2013 under the title "Safety failures the offshore oil industry: from Piper Alpha to Deepwater Horizon" in the book Governance, Change and the Working Environment, Amityville: Baywood Press, USA.

Provided by Linköping University

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